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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000151

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GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: PREF PREL KN KS CH TH

SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES: NEW ARRIVALS OUTSTRIP RESETTLEMENT PACE

REF: CHIANG MAI 92

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael K. Morrow, Consul General, Chiang Mai,
DoS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Over 1,400 North Korean refugees are expected to cross into Thailand during 2007, according to projections by officials in Northern Thailand. This flow is outstripping the pace of resettlement of the refugees in South Korea and elsewhere, and worsening crowding conditions in Thailand's immigration detention centers. As a result, newly arriving North Koreans are facing longer stays in Thailand, straining Thai support resources and making RTG officials nervous. End Summary.

1,400 North Koreans To Enter Thailand in 2007

¶2. (C) CG met September 11 with Tomoharu Ebihara, a Japanese national and Coordinator of Payap University's Thai-Japan Center. Ebihara actively follows Thailand's North Korean refugee issue, and will attend the International Conference on the North Korean Human Rights Situation in Bangkok September 17-21.

¶3. (C) Ebihara asserted that, if this year's current pace continues, over 1,400 North Korean refugees will have entered Thailand in 2007. He compared this to a 2006 figure of around 1,000. Some of the refugees voluntarily surrender to local police upon entering Thailand; others make their way to Bangkok to seek shelter at safe houses run by missionaries. But in either case, the North Koreans are facing longer stays in Thailand because the Republic of Korea's (ROK) resettlement processing is not keeping pace. Ebihara put the ROK resettlement figure at 300 to 400 per year. He said Seoul was considering an increase, but had no easy solution because its reception center for new North Korean arrivals was filled to capacity.

¶4. (C) Other sources in Northern Thailand confirmed Ebihara's assertion of rising North Korean refugee flows. Royal Thai Army

(RTA) First Cavalry Division Major General Wantip Wongwai, whose Pha Muang Task Force is responsible for border security along the northernmost section of the Laos and Burma borders, told CG September 13 the figure of 1,400 new North Korean refugees in 2007 was about right. He claimed the number of North Koreans who would remain in Thailand long-term would be higher than in the past, because the ROK's screening process was getting more selective, making it harder for North Koreans to make the onward move from Thailand to South Korea.

¶ 15. (C) The view that greater ROK selectivity would lead to more North Korean refugees staying long-term in Thailand was also expressed to us by Phujatkarn newspaper northern bureau chief Bannarot Buaklee. Bannarot, who earlier this year wrote an investigative series about Thailand's North Korean refugees, also deemed realistic the figure of 1,400 new arrivals in 2007. He claimed the ROK government, by not taking steps to expand its reception center for North Korean refugees, was signaling that it could not absorb intake beyond current levels.

¶ 16. (C) Chiang Rai Provincial Security Officer Phinit Kaeochitkhongthong confirmed to us that the North Korean refugee flow was increasing. In the first seven months of this year, provincial police have recorded 310 arrests of North Korean refugees. This pace projects to 531 for the entire year, compared to 367 arrests in 2006 (reftel). In addition, the RTA Pha Muang Task Force has detained another 142 North Koreans so far this year (but post has no 2006 figures to compare with).

Difficult Conditions in Immigration Detention Centers

¶ 17. (C) North Koreans who surrender to police after crossing the Mekong River from Laos into Chiang Rai province are sent to the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Mae Sai. Conditions at the IDC are as bad as or worse than when we visited last May (reftel), Ebihara told us. The facility is smelly, dirty, and "looks like a jail." Its holding capacity is about 100 people,

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but the center currently houses 207 North Koreans, according to Mae Sai Immigration Office records. The office has transferred another 285 North Koreans to the Bangkok IDC during 2007, but that facility is also overcrowded. According to Ebihara, the Bangkok IDC is designed to hold 100-150 people, but currently has 200-250, the bulk of whom are North Koreans.

¶ 18. (C) Ebihara and the NGOs he works with are trying to ensure that North Koreans in the detention centers get proper medical care. He noted that a 60-year-old male detainee died at the Bangkok IDC in August, but did not know the cause of death. While authorities do allow doctors into the facilities, the lack of a common language is a challenge. Also, with detainees now facing longer stays in custody prior to resettlement - usually "several months," Ebihara said -- their mental health is a growing concern. Ebihara reported that, in recent months, Thai immigration officials have been stricter in granting humanitarian workers both access to and information about North Korean detainees. (Note: This tracks with a recent comment by the Chiang Rai Immigration Office chief, who said his Bangkok headquarters had instructed him not release North Korean detainee figures to us. End Note).

Comment

¶ 19. (C) None of our interlocutors suggested that the Thai Government was considering changing its current policy of (a) not deporting refugees back to North Korea; and (b) permitting resettlement of refugees to South Korea. However, all indicated that the RTG was apprehensive about rising numbers of arriving North Koreans, and nervous about the strain it placed on detention facilities. These pressures, if unalleviated, could lead Thai immigration officials to be less cooperative with

foreign partners on issues of access and information as a means to gain leverage in addressing Thailand's growing North Korean refugee burden.

MORROW